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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the metaphors of language and conversation as a way to connect thought and action in understanding teaching. The goal of the essay is to look more closely at the influence of context and situation on the conversation of teachers--not only a means of interaction, communication, and thought but also a type of relationship with one's surroundings. The discussion centers around the three partners to a conversation--a practitioner, colleagues (those sharing an interest or objective), and a place (a community of involved persons). The assertion of the essay is that community and place have value, and moreover, that community and place are necessary for healthy practice and healthy people. The conversation of teaching, to be effective and health-giving, must be embedded in a community of practice and place. In school settings, these communities are built through dialogue and discussion, collaboration, services rendered and received, conjoint successes and failures, celebration, and mutual support. (JD)

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COMMUNITY AND PLACE IN THE CONVERSATION OF TEACHING

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COMMUNITY AND PLACE IN THE CONVERSATION OF TEACHING

For some time now, I have been exploring the metaphors of language and conversation as a way to connect thought and action in our understanding of teaching (Yinger, 1987a,b; 1988; in press). So far, just like a good psychologist, I have focused on the individual, trying to understand the conversational nature of teachers' instructional thought and interaction. My goal in this essay is more corporate, looking more closely at the influence of context and situation. My task, most simply, is one of etymology-- trying to understand the implications of a latin root of the word conversation, conversari. Conversari means literally "to dwell with" and suggests that conversation involves entering into and living with a situation and its participants. As such, conversation is not only a means of interaction, communication, and thought but also a type of relationship with with one's surroundings. It is possible that relationship is the most basic meaning of conversation and that it frames the more conscious and visible forms.

A conversation of practice involves three central partners: a practitioner, his or her collaborators, and a place. A practitioner is one who possesses particular knowledge and skill employed to produce specific yields or outcomes for participants (including oneself). These aims are accomplished by interacting in a participatory mode with another set of actors, variously

referred to as partners, clients, audience, etc., depending on the nature of the interaction. This interaction always takes place in a particular place: an identifiable world made up of specific patterns, structures, substance, and meanings. This practical world is physical, cultural, and communal and possesses a tradition grounded in history, knowledge, and belief. To practice a particular occupation, craft, or art one must enter into a relationship with participants and place; neither of these partners can be safely ignored.

The conversation of farming, for instance, involves a farmer interacting (co-laboring) with soil, plants, animals, and other persons in a particular place defined by a field, a farm, a bioregion, a family, and a community (Note 1). The farmer's intelligence and effectiveness is based on situated knowledge and skill-- how to interact with particular crops and soil, for instance, given the particular farming context. A good farmer will consider a complex set of patterns, forms, and information related to a particular place. This may range from considerations of climate and geography, to the effects of various means of cultivation or husbandry, to the traditional forms of work and produce desired in a particular community and culture. Farming can be considered effective when it yields healthy produce and practices benefiting all the participants and the place: good food, sustained fertility, and enriched community.

Likewise, a literary practice like poetry can be judged by

its ability to generate health and well-being. The forms this may take include increased understanding and meaning, personal enjoyment and satisfaction, and enriched communal life. The poet's experience with fellow inhabitants and their jointly constructed world yields particular oral or written products to be shared with audiences and readers. The place of poetry includes a particular living community but also the traditions, forms, and knowledge connecting conversational partners to the past. To the degree that a poet, or any other writer for that matter, loses touch or disregards audience and place, the conversation of practice degenerates into monologue or self-talk.

The conversation of teaching, like these two other practical arts, must include all three partners to be effective and healthy. A good teacher must co-labor with students (and with parents and other educators) in a particular place with its particular patterns, traditions, and forms. This place, like other practical worlds, is organized at a number of levels, e.g., community, school, classroom, curriculum, activity, problem, story. Knowledge and skill must be artfully adapted to the particular participants and context. The teacher's intelligence and action, like the farmer's and poet's, must be situated and responsive. Understanding, meaning, satisfaction, enjoyment-- healthy learning-- result when this is accomplished.

Social scientists and educators have spent alot of time exploring the human components of this conversational equation.

Practitioners and clients, performers and audiences, teachers and students habitate thousands of studies and millions of pages of description. Place, for the most part, has been considered background, context, and frame. Recently, place has become central to understanding human thought and action in the work of ecologists, geographers, and cultural critics. Following is an attempt to work through some of this thinking and explore its implications for our understanding of community, place, and the conversation of teaching.

Common Ground

A fundamental question of our age is the proper relationship between humankind and our world. Work in a variety of fields is exploring the nature of this relationship and locating modern ills in the breakdown of fundamental connections to the natural and built environment and to one another. Ecologists point to alienation from natural processes and environments. Geographers and architects to the abstractness and placelessness of cities and buildings. Cultural critics to the loss of tradition, memory, and story in literature, art, and practice. Social critics point to the deterioration of family, neighborhood, and community. Philosophers to a misunderstanding of the human condition. At the root of each of these criticisms is the concept of embeddedness--that to be fully human is to be properly grounded in community, place, and nature.

The Ground of Being

Many of the criticisms of our current condition grow out of an alternative definition of humanness. Modern western culture is founded on notions of human authority, independence, and rational agency. Philosophers like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Buber argue that this conception is in error and that we can better understand humankind through the ideas of dependence, relation, and care. They point to Descarte's famous dictum-- Cogito Ergo Sum-- as the wrong turn. By separating thinking humans (res cogitans) from the though-about world (res extensa) a subject/object distinction was introduced to human consciousness that has grown into a fundamental alienation between humans and their world.

A remaking of relational consciousness within the world of experience is the basic program of experience-based philosophies like phenomenology: "a return to the things themselves, to a world that proceeds knowlege and yet is basic to it, as countryside is to geography and blossoms to botany" (Evernden, 1985, 57). Thinkers working within these frameworks point to the constitutive nature of action and experiences. Consiousness is always conscousness of; the dualism between thought and object disappears in the act of creating meaning. The world becomes a participant, not just an object of consciousness. Erazim Kohak's description of a man looking desparately for an ashtray provides a

helpful example of this interaction:

> After a few puffs, the subject looks anxiously for a place to deposit his ashes. There are no ashtrays. The subject casts about, settles on a seashell or a nut dish, and, with a mixture of anxiety and relief, knocks off the ash. He did not "find" and ashtray "in the objective world; there was none there to be found. Rather he constituted an ashtray in his act (1978, 11).

Consciousness, for the phenomenologist, encloses an object. We therefore concentrate on the meaning of the experience rather than on the act itself. For the smoker, the constitutive act is invisible, as is the context of meaning; there was no ashtray until one was required, yet the ashtray was not imaginary-- it exists where it functions in experience. Common sense may perceive a world of objects, but this perception depends not only on the world but on the manner of grasping meaning in consciousness.

The implications of this viewpoint for a description of being human have been pursued by a number of philosophers. None is more provocative than the work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger rejects the "thing language" of philosophy and tries to understand being primarily in terms of relationship to the world. William Barrett, one of Heidegger's interpreters puts it concisely: "My Being is not something that takes place within my skin...; my Being, rather, is spread over a field or region which is the world of its

care and concern" (1962, 217). Heidegger's term for "field" or "region" is Dasein, meaning literally in German "Being-there"-- the connecting of being to world and place. "The Being of Dasein itself is to be made visible as care" (Heidegger, 1962, 83-84). Just as we might know a territory by the actions of its occupant, Dasein is known by the evidence of care.

> Now, there is nothing at all remote or abstract about this idea of man, or Dasein, as a field. It checks with our everyday observation in the case of the child who has just learned to respond to his own name. He comes promptly enough at being called by name; but if asked to point out the person to whom the name belongs, he is just as likely to point to Mommy or Daddy as to himself-- to the frustration of both eager parents. Some months later, asked the same question the child will point to himself. But before he has reached that stage, he has heard his name as naming a field or region of Being with which he is concerned, and to which he responds, whether the call is to come to food, to mother, or whatever. And the child is right. His name is not the name of an existance that takes place within the envelope of his skin: that is merely the awfully abstract social convention that has imposed itself not only on his parents but on the history of philosophy. The basic meaning the child's name has for him does not disappear as he grows older; it only becomes covered over by the more abstract social convention.

> He secretly hears his own name called whenever he hears any region of Being named with which he is vitally involved (Barrett, 1962, 218-219).

The Being of Dasein asserts the primacy of relationship. By defining being human as hearing one's name in a field of care, Heidegger grounds the human condition as "being-in-the-world." It also implies a different sense of environment and context.

> Although humans have a bodily existence just as other creatures do, and are similiarly reliant on the earth, they also have a particular aptitude: they inhabit what Heidegger calls 'world.' World is that part of earth which is open to human understanding. Heidegger says it is 'that "wherein" a factual Dasein as such can be said to "live".' and that worldhood is 'that referential totality which constitutes significance'... World may refer to the public 'we' world or to one's private environment. But above all it is the realm of the understandable, our region of significance and meaning (Evernden, 1985, 65).

The ground of being, according to these conceptions, is a field of care. The premise shifts from "I think, therefore I am" to "I care, therefore I am" (Steiner, 1978). Person is essentially linked to place; to be human is to be-in-the-world. Context and place become essential to defining humanity. Relationship becomes the prime context of existance, and the goal of being human is to find one's home, or place, in the world.

The Essence of Place

The geographer Edward Relph in Place and Placelessness (1976) builds on the arguments of the phenomenologists by examining the powerful influence of place as a center of existance and significance. He describes "place consciousness" as a fundamental and powerful human characteristic. For Relph, places incorporate aspects of location, landscape, time, and community. Rootedness to place meets basic human needs for security, order, and perspective.

> The places to which we are most attached are literally fields of care, settings in which we have had a multiplicity of experiences and which call forth an entire complex of affections and responses. But to care for a place involves more than having a concern for it that is based on certain past experiences and future expectations-- there is also a real responsibility and respect for that place both for itself and for what it is to yourself and to others. There is, in fact, a complete committment to that place, a committment that is profound as any that a person can make, for caretaking is indeed "the basis of man's relation to the world" (Relph, 1976, 38).

Drawing on the ideas of Husserl (1958), Relph further argues for a rethinking of our notions of intention and consciousness. Human intention should be understood as "a relationship of being

between man and the world that gives meaning" (p. 42), rather than simply in terms of individual, diliberate choice or purpose. Human consciousness thus becomes not merely consciousness of something but consciousness of something in its place. As such, place becomes a basis element in the ordering of experience, and place-making a necessary activity for wellbeing.

> The basic meaning of place, its essence, does not therefore come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the local community that occupies it, nor from the superficial and mundane experiences-- though these are all common and perhaps necessary aspects of place. The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centers of human existance...A french philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, (cited in Matore, 1966, p.6) has summerized this simply: "An individual is not distinct from his place; he is that place." (Relph, 1976, 43)

The Character of Community

Community is a form of life and work that acknowledges the importance of place and the relational nature of being. Wendell Berry (1987) has said action necessarily implies place and community. "There can be disemboddied thought, but not disemboddied action. Action, emboddied thought, requires local and communal reference" (p.27). This has led him to define

community as "common experience and common effort on common ground." The necessary forms for this experience and effort are "patterns of value and restraint, principle and expectation, memory, familiarity, and understanding that, inwardly, add up to character and, outwardly, to culture (Berry, 1983, 67).

Character and Culture

These patterns serving community to which Berry refers are different from the information serving the technical decision making of the modern world. This is knowledge in the service of caring rather than controling. These are patterns of stewardship rather than "resource utilization."

The exercise of knowledge and character in relation to a place becomes a practical dialectic, a conversation of practice. What often begins in blissful ignorance grows through interaction and relationship into good work. Wendell Berry catches this process well in his description of coming to belong to a particular place-- in this case, a farm.

> ...it has not been uncharacteristic for a farmer's connection to a farm to begin in love. This has not always been so ignorant a love as it sometimes is now; but always, no matter what one's agricultural experience may have been, one's connection to a newly bought farm will begin in love that is more or less ignorant. One loves the place because present appearances recommend it, and because they suggest

possibilities irresistibly imaginable. One's head, like a lover's, grows full of visions. One walks over the premises, saying, "If this were mine, I'd make a permanent pasture here; here is where I'd plant an orchard; here is where I'd dig a pond." These visions are the usual stuff of unfulfilled love and induce wakefulness at night.

When one buys the farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts. Truth begins to intrude with its matter-of-fact. One's work may be defined in part by one's visions, but it is defined in part too by problems, which the work leads to and reveals. And daily life, work, and problems gradually alter the visions. It invariably turns out, I think, that one's first vision of one's place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one's sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one's love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one's visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life--all have changed by mutual correction. Correct discipline, given enough time, gradually removes one's self from one's line of sight. One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is. (1983, 69-70).

"Correct discipline" here adds up to character. The disciplines, appropriate thought and action, of the conversation

of practice include listening to one's surroundings and the results of one's work, seeing detail, not overly simplifying (or abstracting), setting boundaries, understanding and accepting the concept of "enough", not exceeding appropriate scale, and being neighborly. These disciplines when practiced for "enough time" add up to good work.

> The good worker will not suppose that good work can be made properly answerable to haste, urgency, or even emergency. But the good worker knows too that after it is done work requires yet more time to prove its worth. One must stay to experience and study and understand the consequences-- must understand them by living with them, and then correct them, if necessary, by longer living and more work (Berry, 1983, p. 70).

Good work when preserved in a community's memory adds up to culture. Without community, the good work of an individual does not last long. Knowledge and skill pass on with the person.

> In its cultural aspect, the community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs, and stories, and both consciously and unconsiously in ways. A healthy culture hold preserving knowlege in place for a long time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility accumulates in the soil. In both, death becomes potentiality (Berry, 1983, 73).

In addition to preserving knowledge and ways, a community has

other necessary characteristics. Community functions by mutual dependency; to be neighborly is to be involved in mutual work and help. A healthy community draws primarily on local resources and prizes making and growing over purchasing things from others (usually outsiders) interested in the growth of a consumer economy profiting someone somewhere else. In addition, a community takes active steps to pass on local knowledge and practical skill to young people or newcomers.

Wendell Berry (1987) offers a penetrating analysis of the relations and commitments in community life as captured by a quote from Emerson (1979) in "The American Scholar":

> I grasp the hands of those next to me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct, that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech (p.95).

Berry comments:

> We see how [this sentence] legislates against what we now call "groupiness"; neighborhood is a given condition, not a contrived one; he is not talking about a "planned community" or a "network," but about the necessary dependence of those who are "next" to each other. We see how it invokes dance, acting in concert, as a metaphor of almost endless reference. We see how the the phrase "to suffer and to work" refuses sentimentalization. We see how common work, common suffering, and a common willingness to join and belong are understood as the conditions upon which speech is possible in

the "dumb abyss" in which we are divided (p. 28). This speech, the conversation of community, "wells up out of memory, and in a sense is the community, the presence of its past and its hope" (Berry, 1987, 30). Joining and belonging, interdependence and mutual work, and memory in place connnect people to one another and to those preceeding and following. Character, work, and memory joining hands create the dance of community and culture.

Dwelling and Sparing

Martin Heidegger, in his philosophical quest to explore the nature of being, uncovered two further aspects of character and culture. In his essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1971) he locates critical aspects of being by examining the original meanings and the connections among the words in his title. "It is language", says Heidegger, "that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature" (p. 146).

Heidegger's first quest in this essay is to uncover the meaning of the German word Bauen, or building. His own words can best convey this etymological journey.

> The Old English and High German word for building, buan, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in a place. The real meaning of the verb bauen, namely to dwell, has been lost to us. But a covert trace of it has been preserved in the German word Nachbar, neighbor... the

near-dweller...Where the word buaen still speaks in its original sense it also says how far the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, bauen, buan, bhu, beo are our word bin in the versions: ich bin, I am, du bist, you are, the imperative form bis, be. What then does ich bin mean? The old word bauen, to which the bin belongs, answers: ich bin, du bist mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Buan, dwelling (146-147).

Heidegger then asks in what does the nature of dwelling consist? Language once more speaks to reveal its primary meaning:

> The Old Saxon wuon, the Gothic wunian, like the old word bauen, mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the gothic wunian says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. Wunian means to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, Friede, means the free, das frye, and fry means: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded. To free really means to spare. The sparing itself consists not only in the fact that we do not harm the one whom we spare. Real sparing is something positive and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we "free" it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of peace. To dwell, to be at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the

> preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving (148-149).

Thus, the character and cultural relationships that best capture being human, according to Heidegger, are those of "caretaking"--dwelling and sparing. Building home and building community is a preserving activity: preserving place, preserving persons, preserving memory. It is a willingness to spare, to not exploit, to not change casually or arbitrarily, to build and cultivate without an effort to subordinate the world to human will. As individuals we dwell in a field of care; as members we are meant to dwell in a community of care.

The Community of Teaching

These notions of being, place, and community form a picture of an individual quite different in many respects from the modern image of the autonomous, rational, and upwardly mobile professional. The concepts of rootedness, dependence, membership, and caring nurture seem somehow out of step. Are these ideas efforts to "turn back the clock" to times and relations that are no longer desirable or possible? If the clock is wrong, says Wendell Berry, then maybe we should.

Reason, objectivity, and technique dominate thought and action in the modern world. The landscape created by reflection and reason is ordered and leveled, devoid of memory and character.

Institutions have replaced places, communities, and families as centers of activity and meaning. The money economy has become the indicator of well being; the public good the abstract target. Under the guise of objectivity, meaning is often confiscated to fuel the engines of observation, analysis, and reflection. We have come close to creating Kierkegaard's "reflective and passionless age", that "hinders and stifles all action; it levels...it leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance" (1962, quoted in Relph, 1976, p. 125).

Like other professions and institutions, teaching and schooling have fallen victim to modern tendencies. Many schools, like many houses, often realize Le Corbusier's dream of "machines to live in." Students and teachers are treated as interchangeable parts; career paths blur faces and places. Individuality reigns. Memory is short.

My assertation in this essay is that community and place have value. Moreover, community and place are necessary for healthy practice and healthy people. The conversation of teaching, to be effective and health-giving, must be embedded in a community of practice and place. Healthy practice, cultivating fields of care, is accomplished by place-making and learning community.

Place-Making

Historically, the places humans have come to regard as significant centers of life and meaning were created by an

unselfconscious process of shaping and meaning assignment spanning generations or centuries. "In unselfconscious experience an authentic sense of place is rather like the type of relationship characterized by Martin Buber (1958) as 'I-Thou', in which the subject and object, person and place divisions are wholly replaced by the relationship itself, for this is complete and mutual (Relph, 1976, 65). The selfconsciousness of the modern mind and world make this sense of place difficult to attain. It is more likely that a modified relationship, an "I-You" relationship as proposed by Harvey Cox (1965), should be the aim of a selfconscious place making. Though not as intense and complete as an "I-Thou" relationship, a person seeks to experience places as openly as possible in an "I-You" relationship and to respond to unique identities and characteristics.

Place-making is particularizing rather than abstracting; making order from experience rather than from maps or plans. Place-making is claiming by feelings a piece of the environment, the creation of a world of significance. Heidegger's notions of Dwelling and Sparing describe relationships conducive to creating meaningful places. In social settings, place-making is a product of the creation of community and culture. Learning community is a means for making a place.

Learning Community

Joseph Schwab (1975) has described three kinds of community

necessary for fruitful conversation in learning settings: community of confidence, affective community, and cognitive community. A community of confidence arises from past collaborations in which the usefulness of one another and a degree of dependability have been discovered. Affective community results from shared experiences, fortunes, and satisfactions. Cognitive community is the result of accumulating a body of common knowledge, both symbolically mediated and directly experienced, and the development of a means for communication and expression.

In school settings, these communities are built through dialogue and discussion, collaboration, services rendered and received, conjoint successes and failures, celebration, mutual support, and so forth (Schwab, 1975,p.39). They are the result of living and working together, as Wendell Berry says, for "enough time." For the newcomer to teaching, joining these communities is a matter of learning place and learning conversation.

> Learning place means learning how the practitioner fits into surrounding life. It involves learning in detail about the other participants in practice, their lives, their histories, and their relations to each other. It includes learning the characteristics that define a place: family, neighborhood, community, culture. It also includes learning aspects of the physical world defining a place. How is place defined in terms of land, bioregion, plant and animal life? Learning place involves learning about any aspect of life

bearing on the meanings, beliefs, and actions of its inhabitants.

Learning place implies a commitment to place. The specialist practitioner too often is passing through on a "career path." The conversation of practice is rooted, grounded, and locally committed. If place is important to the conversation of practice, then practice must become liberated from the industrial doctrine of interchangeable parts, interchangeable places, and interchangeable people

Learning place requires learning past. A present place is linked to past places; current practice is linked to past practice. Learning past can be both broadly and narrowly construed. Broadly speaking, learning past includes the full range of cultural heritage: history, literature, science, music, art, philosophy. How does past thought and action influence that of the present? More narrowly, learning past means learning the traditional means and traditional forms of effective practice in a particular place. What has worked when? and with whom? What forms bind and what forms liberate? As Wendell Berry says, it is tradition that protects us from falling prey to fashion (Yinger, in press).

Learning Conversation, for the new teacher, is a matter of learning how to think and act in ways appropriate to practice. The language of practice for teaching is composed of both knowledge and skillful action. It is also composed of beliefs and

values formulated, according to Thomas Green (1984), as conscience of craft, of membership, of sacrifice, of memory, and of imagination.

The conversation of teaching is built on certain forms of action and interaction. The responsiveness of the conversation was portrayed earlier in Wendell Berry's description of learning how to farm a particular piece of land. Work and vision interact with place to gradually develop real understanding and possibility. Work becomes less an activity of imposition and domination and more one of response and cooperation. The conversation of practice becomes one of Dwelling and Sparing; one sees at last where one is, at home and in place.

This conversation is built on a certain character and concerns. These "ways" are sensitive to particularity, detail, scale, complexity, and relationship. They imply a certain kind of intelligence of practice-- one different from the autonomous, rational, information-wielding problem solver of modern professions. Intelligence, in this older sense, is judged by the order and harmony of one's place. Or as an early student of agriculture put it: "The intelligent man, however unlearned, may be known by his surroundings, and by the care of his horse, if he is fortunate enough to have one" (Berry, 1983, 77).

Conclusion

I have tried in this paper to say more than "context is

important." We've known that for a long time. We have not, however, entertained the idea that effective practice is inseparable from place and event. By acknowledging the idea that personal meaning and practical action require intricate relationships with place and community, we come closer to understand our failures in educating teachers and facilitating their entry to the world of practice. The university-- its conception of knowledge and means of study-- seem severely mismatched with practice.

Helping new teachers to learn a profession must not be construed as transporting the university to the classroom. We must examine seriously our efforts to transfer to the world of practice conceptions and techniques of learning, inquiry, and reflection that have been tooled for the the world of academics and science. There is no doubt that effective teaching is grounded in knowledge and skill; the nature of this knowledge and skill is still an open question.

The current climate of reform and opportunity in education can at times become heady. Teacher educators are exploring exciting possibilities and proposing programs and experiences to solve old problems and to anticipate needs of the future. In our search for means to better prepare teachers for practice, we must remember that our task is one of practice and that practical solutions only function as work in place. Utopia, after all, in Greek means "no place."

Note

1. The following descriptions of the conversations of farming, poetry, and teaching are quoted or paraphrased from Yinger (in press).

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